

Title: Economic Inactivity Trailblazer Programme Priority 2 Open Call 3

Report of: Charlotte Carpenter, Director of Education, Inclusion and Public Service Reform

Portfolio: Home of Real Opportunity

Report Summary

In December 2024 the North East Combined Authority (North East CA) was identified as an Economic Inactivity Trailblazer, bringing together health, employment, and skills services to improve the support available to those who are inactive due to ill health and help them return to work. The North East CA will receive up to £10m for delivery in 2025/26.

The content of the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer Delivery Plan, proposed approach and associated outputs and outcomes were agreed by Finance and Investment Board on May 2025 and approved via Delegated Decision in July 2025.

Work has been taking place to mobilise Priority 2 – New Ways of Working. This has been progressed through three phased open calls, each with two strands of activity. The purpose of this report is to provide the outcome of the final Open Call. The report was considered by North East CA's Technical Officers Group (via written procedures) and recommended for approval.

Recommendations

As agreed in the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer Delivery Plan, the Chief Executive is asked to:

- I. Approve the award of funding to providers identified through the final Open Call detailed in Appendix 1.

1. Background

- 1.1 In December 2024 the Mayor secured the North East CA as an Economic Inactivity Trailblazer, bringing together health, employment, and skills services to improve the support available to those who are inactive due to ill health and help them return to work. This £10m investment will provide us with the opportunity to develop and test new and innovative ways to address the persistent challenges of economic inactivity. The content of the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer Delivery Plan, proposed approach, scope of activity, call process and associated outputs/outcomes were agreed by Finance and Investment Board in May 2025.

2. Priority 2: New ways of working through market innovation

- 2.1 This priority is focused on driving innovation in how support for economically inactive residents is designed and delivered. It recognises that while the North East has a broad landscape of employment related services, the pace and complexity of individuals' needs require new thinking and not just reconfiguration of existing provision. Priority 2 aims to unlock untapped potential by testing innovative and personalised models of support that challenge delivery and funding formulas.

3. Commissioning Approach

- 3.1 Following approval of the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer Delivery Plan, commissioning for activity under Priority 2 was undertaken through a phased Open Call Framework. The framework included three Open Calls each with two thematic strands of activity. The first of the Open Calls launched on the 2nd June 2025 and the last closed on 14th July 2025.
- 3.2 The assessment process was underpinned by a structured scoring framework, with weightings attributed to quality criteria such as project design, delivery capability, partnership strength, social value, and mobilisation planning. In addition to the quality criteria, non-scored questions, including

those relating to financial stability, eligibility and compliance were reviewed to ensure minimum standards were met. Value for money was assessed through a detailed review of project budgets, outputs and delivery plans, with consideration given to cost- effectiveness, proportionality and alignment with programme objectives.

- 3.3 A separate assessment panel was held for each of the thematic strands, with panel members including internal programme leads, subject-matter experts, an external consultant, representatives from the North East CA Programme Assurance Team, and an independent moderator.
- 3.4 The final Open Call, which have now been assessed via the panel, includes:
- Support for women
 - Support for employers
- 3.5 As a result a total of 11 projects are being recommended for approval across 12 organisations, for a value of £1,839,904. These projects represent a diverse portfolio of activity testing new and innovative approaches to support people who are economically inactive.
- 3.6 Details of the 11 projects recommended for approval, alongside the individual funding values are included in Appendix 1.

4. Outputs and Outcomes

- 4.1 Expected outputs and outcomes for the each of the four strands of activity were included within the specification and project application guidance documents. Potential providers were asked to detail their contributions to these outputs and outcomes in their business case. In addition, potential providers were also encouraged to submit additional outputs and outcomes that added value to those set out in the specification and contributed to the objectives of Priority 2 and local identified needs.
- 4.2 The outputs and outcomes set out within the specifications and applications were intended to be indicative, recognising that commissioning was undertaken through an open call process. Given the unique nature of each project and the Trailblazer programme's explicit test-and-learn approach, variances between proposed and anticipated figures are to be expected. These variances reflect both the innovative character of the programme and the flexibility required to trial and refine new models of support.
- 4.3 Table 1 below shows the total expected outputs and outcomes detailed within the specifications for each strand of activity within this final Open Call.

Outputs	Proposed	Expected
Number of economically inactive people recruited	125	225
Number of people engaging with keyworker support services	115	112
Number of people supported developing skills (life skills, employment skills)	100	165
Number of economically inactive people supported to engage in job searching	100	145
Number of people are making progress towards or into the labour market	100	0
Number of employers engaged	200	119
Outcomes	Proposed	Expected
Number of people in employment	15	30
Number of people with improved employability skills	20	103
Number of people into education and training	100	72

5. Timetable for Implementation

- 5.1 Project level milestones have been captured as part of each business case, and a review of milestones was included within the assessment process. These will be included in Grant Fund

Agreements and form the basis of ongoing performance management arrangements in line with DWP requirements.

6. Evaluation

- 6.1 Evaluation of this activity will fit within and contribute to the overall programme evaluation. Providers have been encouraged to develop and implement local evaluation within their activity, with proposed topics and research questions included as guidance within the specification. However, an external evaluator will be commissioned to undertake a comprehensive programme evaluation.

7. Recommended Conditions of Funding

No conditions will be included within Grant Funding Agreements.

A. Potential Impact on North East Combined Authority Objectives

All activity will contribute to progressing the Mayor and Cabinet's priorities, with specific emphasis on the Home of Real Opportunity Portfolio and the Public Service Innovation Programme. The Programme aligns to regional and Mayoral economic objectives and underpins North East CA Local Growth Plan priorities to improve skills and employment, tackle child poverty, and specifically increase diversity of employment.

The Economic Inactivity Trailblazer Programme is a key element of the Government's Get Britain Working strategy, which aims to reduce hidden unemployment and support individuals with disabilities, health conditions, and complex employment barriers in securing sustainable jobs.

B. Key risks

A joint strategic risk register has been developed for the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer Programme and the Connect to Work Programme. This strategic risk register is monitored by the Implementation Group that has been created to oversee the management of both programmes.

C. Financial and other resources implications

The total indicative budget for Open Call 3 and related strands of activity is £1,800,000. The table below summarises the recommended allocations across project strands with a proposed allocation of £1,839,904.

Strand of Activity	Projects Recommended	Total Funding
Support for Women	7	£970,508
Support for Employers	4	£869,396
Total	11	£1,839,904

A full review of proposed allocations will be undertaken following the completion of the final Open Call, with particular attention to delivery feasibility, value for money, and alignment with Trailblazer objectives. Any budget adjustments required will be made to ensure resources are deployed effectively and reflect the strategic intent of the programme. This includes refining investment to ensure that the total allocation for Priority 2 investment is utilised.

D. Legal implications

The comments of the Monitoring Officer have been included in this report.

E. Equalities implications

The programme's commissioning approach has been designed to increase opportunities for residents most at risk of poor social and economic outcomes including women and girls, young people, people with health conditions and disabilities. The programmes delivery model has been designed to support the North East CA's equality objective to work with partners and other funders to ensure our funding

opportunities are accessible to organisations working with some of our most under-represented residents.

F. Consultation and engagement

Extensive consultation to support the design and development of this new programme has taken place with a range of key stakeholders including DWP, North East and North Cumbria ICB, members of the North East Regional Labour Market Partnership (including VONNE and employer representatives), Mayoral Combined Authorities and the 7 constituent local authorities.

This consultation included two Tackling Economic Inactivity workshops held with representatives from DWP, ICB and Health, Housing and the Voluntary Sector to consider how to support the design and implementation of a cohesive and co-ordinated approach to tackle economic inactivity across the region. A provider engagement event was held on 2nd June 2025 to share details of the programme and the upcoming calls process. The event was well received with approximately 150 attendees.

G. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Recommendations for Project Approvals

H. Background papers

None

I. Contact officers

Ruth Gaul
Principal Programme Manager
ruth.gaul@northeast-ca.gov.uk

Julie Gwilym
Programme Manager
julie.gwilym@northeast-ca.gov.uk

J. Glossary

DWP	Department of Work and Pensions
North East CA	North East Combined Authority
North East and North Cumbria ICB	North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board
VONNE	Voluntary Organisation Network North East

K. Consultee

Cabinet Member:	Director/Head of Service:	Director of Finance and Investment:	Monitoring Officer:
Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Recommendations for Project Approval

Support for Women

- Total Applications Received: 23
- Projects Recommended: 7

Provider	Project Name	Funding	Geographical Coverage	Project Brief
Family Gateway	HERizon – Helping Women take their step into the future	£146,142	North Tyneside	Family Gateway's Barefoot Professional Model delivers trauma-informed, hyper-local support for economically inactive women with complex barriers, helping them transition at their own pace toward sustained employment. By leveraging lived experience and community trust through the Howdon Hub, it empowers participants to become confident role models and leaders.
Northern Rights Tyne and Wear Social Enterprise	Tara South Tyneside	£147,110	South Tyneside	Tara South Tyneside' is a culturally competent, community-led programme supporting 20 economically inactive Bangladeshi women to overcome exclusion, build confidence, and develop skills for employment. Aligned with the Trailblazer Programme, it pilots new engagement models and personalised keyworker support to facilitate meaningful transitions into work, training, or further assistance.
Groundwork North East & Cumbria	-	£115,413	East Durham	A young women-led pathway of support designed to meet the full range of needs experienced by young women in East Durham. The project supports those affected by violence and living with trauma, anxiety, depression, or physical health conditions - all of which contribute to complex barriers to employment or engagement. EmpowerHer offers a trauma-informed, relationship-centred, and community-based approach to help participants rebuild confidence, improve wellbeing, and move towards education, training, or work.
New College Durham	Aspiring to make Change	£142,075	Chester le Street	This project will support 20 economically inactive women in Chester-le-Street and surrounding areas to overcome personal, social, and structural barriers to employment. Led by New College Durham in partnership with Aspire, a trusted women's support organisation, the programme offers personalised, trauma-informed pathways combining wellbeing support, skills development, peer mentoring, and volunteering. Through a flexible, community-based model, the project will build confidence, wellbeing, and work readiness, contributing to

				a more inclusive local labour market and generating evidence on “what works” to inform future provision
Uplift Associates	My Future, My Path	£175,000	Sunderland	My Future, My Path is a gender and trauma-informed employability, and wellbeing pilot project designed for economically inactive women in Sunderland aged 18–64, particularly those facing health-related barriers to work. Aligned with Trailblazer Specification 2.5, it targets women furthest from the labour market, such as lone parents, carers, older women, trauma survivors, and those managing long-term conditions including menopause.
Big River Bakery	Bee-Lieve	£107,543	Byker & Shieldfield	BeeLieve is a women-only enterprise and wellbeing pathway delivered from Big River Bakery’s community hub and other spaces within Shieldfield and Byker. It will guide 20 economically inactive women who face chronic physical or mental health barriers through five structured, trauma-informed modules that combine arts-based wellbeing and confidence building, accredited employability training and live trading experience.
The Wise Group	Durham Women’s Hub	£137,225	Durham	A seven-month pilot will create a trauma-informed Women’s Hub for Durham. The Hub will offer a one-stop venue where health teams, VCSE partners and other services collaborate to provide integrated health, wellbeing and employability support three days a week. Co-designed with users, the programme will engage 100 economically inactive women—35 of whom will receive wrap-around relational mentoring—building confidence, improving wellbeing and enabling progression into training, volunteering or paid work.

Support for Employers

- Total Applications Received: 9
- Projects Recommended: 4

Provider	Project Name	Funding	Geographical Coverage	Project Brief
Ingeus UK Ltd	Inclusion Works	£198,856	North East	Ingeus’ Employer Trailblazer project, InclusionWorks, will engage 60 employers across the North-East to provide individualized consultation to understand their recruitment and retention needs. Employers will then be able to access a menu of online workshops and networking sessions, facilitated by Ingeus’ Inclusion Champions, to help them embed inclusive recruitment practices and improve the satisfaction, retention, and performance of their teams.

Newcastle College Group	Open Doors	£171,500	North East	Adopting a two-track engagement model the project will engage with both ready-to-learn employers and those hesitant to engage, using trust, evidence, and lived experience to break down barriers, embedding inclusive cultures that lasts
Society Matters CiC	Ready to Recruit	£205,618	North East	Ready to Recruit is an innovative, practical, insight-led programme that will drive system change, supporting employers across the North East to build more confident, capable and inclusive recruitment practices. Some employability interventions focus on preparing economically inactive individuals for work, but none focus on making the workplace ready for them.
Zenith Training	Recruit, Retain & Thrive	£293,422	North East	The offer is built around four core components and two wraparound support services that provide practical training, AI-driven enablement, and ongoing peer and professional guidance.